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## Hikari no Wa

### A New Religion Recovering from Disaster

In March 2007 Jōyū Fumihiro, ex-spokesperson of Aum Shinrikyō and ex-representative of Aleph, set up a new religious organization called Hikari no Wa (literally “Circle of Light”) with around two hundred members. Hikari no Wa strongly and publicly rejects Asahara’s authority, and the image the group is trying to construct and promote is centered on its desire to separate itself from Aum. Furthermore, the group seems interested in exploring different religious practices (including practices related to the Shinto tradition) in order to project itself as a “new group” and not be accused of being a “new Aum.” This article draws on fieldwork and interviews with Hikari no Wa’s members in order to explore the tension in Hikari no Wa between its attempt to create a “new religion,” distancing itself completely from the previous leader and practices, and, at the same time, its need to deal with the legacy of Aum Shinrikyō and the consequences of the tragic event of 1995.

KEYWORDS: Hikari no Wa—Aleph—new religious movements—Aum Shinrikyō

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The past is the one thing we are not prisoners of.  
We can do with the past exactly what we wish.  
What we can't do is to change its consequences.  
—John Berger, *From A to X: A Story in Letters*

AT THE beginning of March 2007, Jōyū Fumihiro 上祐史浩, ex-spokesperson of Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 and ex-representative of Aleph アレフ (the name used by Aum since 2000), and four other members held a press conference to announce their withdrawal from Aleph and to reveal their intention to start a new group. Two months later another press conference was organized in Tokyo and Jōyū, together with the new group's representatives, proclaimed the foundation of Hikari no Wa ひかりの輪 (the English name used by the group is “The Circle of Rainbow Light”). Members briefly introduced to the journalists the changes they intended to make to the group's teachings and practices.<sup>1</sup> They openly emphasized their intention to separate themselves from Aum, invited people to visit their centers, showed videos of their activities to journalists, and presented themselves in front of the press wearing suits or tracksuits rather than the religious clothes worn by Aum's renunciants (*shukkesha* 出家者).

This event drew attention to the fact that Aum, in various guises, had continued to exist after the events of 1995, and that people associated with that movement were continuing to search for a religious identity in the aftermath of Aum. This is an area that has thus far not been covered to any degree in studies of Aum, and my article is aimed at dealing with this lacuna. Several works were published on Aum immediately after the sarin gas attack (KAPLAN and MARSHALL 1996, WATANABE 1996; REPP 1997; SHIMAZONO 1997; METRAUX 1999; READER 2000; KISALA and MULLINS 2001), and the group has gained attention from scholars in very different fields such as religious studies, sociology, psychology, political studies and so on, but comparatively little academic study has been done on what happened to Aum members after the leader and high-ranking members were arrested.<sup>2</sup> Materials produced by the media are also very limited. After two

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1. Both press conferences are available online at <http://www.joyus.jp/interview/17/0052381512.html> (March 2007) and [http://www.joyus.jp/interview/162007/0053\\_59.html](http://www.joyus.jp/interview/162007/0053_59.html) (May 2007; accessed 4 November 2011).

2. However, since 1995, some works have been published by ex-Aum members, such as Asahara's fourth daughter MATSUMOTO Satoka (2010), NODA Naruhito (2010), Aleph repre-

years of deep interest in Aum (1995–1996), newspapers and TV channels now report about the group only in the case of significant events, for example, the final results of trials or incidents involving ex-members such as the dispute that arose between Aleph members and residents in Adachi ward in Tokyo in 2010 and 2011.<sup>3</sup> Yet the continued activities of those associated with Aum to pursue religious paths—an issue highlighted by the attempt by Jōyū and others to form a new movement in 2007—merit serious attention, since this not only allows us to explore the question of what impact the Aum Affair had on the movement itself, but also raises major academic questions about how religious groups that are associated with catastrophes try to deal with their past while striving to continue or develop their activities in the present.

Sociologists of religion are familiar with debates regarding the “failure of prophecy” and reactions to the loss of charismatic leaders in new religious movements. In their classic study, FESTINGER, RIECKEN, and SCHACHTER (1956) developed the theory of cognitive dissonance to explain why members of some groups did not abandon their beliefs despite clear evidence of the failure of prophetic pronouncements. This theory has been criticized and discussed by other scholars, and the adaptational strategies of other new religious movements, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Lubavitch Hasidim, that have similarly faced problems related to “the failure of prophecy” have been evaluated (DAWSON 1999). However, very little research has been conducted on members of new religious movements who were part of a group that committed violent acts—violence that was, according to the group, justified and supported by apocalyptic prophecies—but who were not necessarily directly involved in those violent acts perpetrated by other members, and who decided to not withdraw from the organization when confronted with evidence of leaders’ and members’ involvement in criminal activities. One of the reasons might be that in most cases, especially if we consider recent examples among

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sentative from 2007 to 2010), MUNAKATA Makiko (2010; Hikari no Wa PR and webmaster), and by anti-cult movement activists.

3. In February 2010 Aleph bought a lot of land and a building in Iriya, Adachi ward (Tokyo) and started renovating it. The group members who had until then been living in Setagaya ward gradually moved to the new facility (KŌAN CHŌSACHŌ 2011, 42–43). The group’s building in Setagaya was demolished in 2011. Adachi ward residents and the local authority strongly opposed the relocation of Aleph’s members and organized several anti-Aum demonstrations, coordinating themselves with the Setagaya anti-Aum movement (Oumu Taisaku Jūmin Kyōgikai オウム対策住民協議会; see <http://www.kyogikai.jp/> (accessed 15 November 2011)). In October 2010 Adachi ward enacted the “Adachi Ward Ordinance Regarding the Regulation of Antisocial Groups” (*Adachiku hanshakaitekidantai no kisei ni kansuru jōrei* 足立区反社会的団体の規制に関する条例) which allows the local government to require periodical reports from the group and on-site inspections of its facility (KŌAN CHŌSACHŌ 2011, 47). See also <http://www.city.adachi.tokyo.jp/008/d01800064.html> (accessed 15 November 2011).

so-called new religious movements (such as the Branch Davidians, the Order of the Solar Temple, or the Peoples Temple), groups that have lost their charismatic leaders tend to disappear. From this point of view, Aum presents a very interesting case study: although having had a significant decrease in membership after 1995, not only did Aum not disappear, but it also tried, at least partially, to restructure and reorient itself in the public domain.

The primary sources used for this article are books, magazines, DVDs, and other materials released by the group since 1995, and annual reports issued by Japan's Public Security Intelligence Agency (hereafter, PSIA; Jp. Kōan Chōsachō), which has continued to monitor Aum and its offshoots since 1995. Furthermore, since 2008 I have been conducting interviews with members of Hikari no Wa and ex-members of Aum and I have attended various Hikari no Wa events and pilgrimages. My aim here is neither to assess the sincerity of Hikari no Wa members' claims and to give the group a "bill of health," nor to second the PSIA's opinion that Hikari no Wa is "hiding the influence of Asahara" (PUBLIC SECURITY INTELLIGENCE AGENCY 2011, 60) in order to increase proselytism and avoid security control. Both those approaches in examining new religious movements have raised serious problems in the past (as pointed out, for example, by READER 2000 and KISALA and MULLINS 2001) and researchers should be careful to avoid being manipulated from one side or the other. Rather, my intention here is to trace the development of a new religious movement as it happens, including the change in teachings and the search for a new path, and to investigate what could happen to a group after a disaster and how a group of believers convinced that their movement possessed the truth could seek to reconstruct itself after criminal acts beset the earlier group.

### *Aleph and Hikari no Wa*

In the first few months after Aum's sarin gas attack, when leading members were arrested and some of them started confessing their crimes, many devotees, especially lay members, left the organization. For most of the *shukkesha*—members living communal lives—who had cut their ties with their families, quit their jobs, and dedicated their lives to the group, the choice of disaffiliation was not unproblematic. For some of them, as confirmed by my interviews with ex-members and with Noda Naruhito, who spent some time as a public representative of Aleph, the "exit costs" (ZABLOCKI 1997) appeared higher than the practical "benefits of staying in the group" (WESSINGER 2000, 9) and prevented them from disaffiliating. By April 1998, thus, membership stabilized at around five hundred *shukkesha* and six hundred lay members (MAEKAWA 2001, 181). As illustrated by MAEKAWA (2001), members' reactions immediately after the sarin gas attack developed through several different phases. At the beginning the group

reacted with a complete denial of Aum's involvement and rejected all allegations regarding its criminal activities. This reaction was sustained by Asahara's teachings in which he constantly claimed that the group was persecuted by the state. After Asahara's arrest in May 1995 and the presentation of more evidence by the police, the group stopped their public protest against this "state conspiracy" and retreated into silence. Internally, the group used doctrinal explanations to justify and legitimize the violence (MULLINS 2001, 81), while some members continued to consider the accusations a conspiracy against Asahara. At the same time the group had to face the loss of its charismatic leader when he was arrested, incarcerated, and put on trial. Initially the members tried to replace Asahara with his young sons, but the attempt was unsuccessful (MAEKAWA 2004). While the group continued to exist thereafter, it tried to avoid public appearances and refused to publicly apologize for the crimes committed by members. In August 1999 Aum Shinrikyō received a written note from its court-appointed bankruptcy administrators to stop using its name.

In an article published in 2004 Maekawa wrote that, while she thought that Aum would probably survive as a group of "personal seekers," mainly due to the fact that it was arduous for members to disaffiliate, a new prospect had recently emerged:

One of Asahara's closest disciples who was released from jail in December 1999 assumed the official leadership in January 2002. He is greatly respected and admired by current members and is considered to be the first to take over the founder's position. It appears that there is some chance that the movement could be centered around this new charismatic leader in the near future.

(MAEKAWA 2004, 155)

The new leader Maekawa referred to was Jōyū Fumihiro, previously Aum's spokesperson and one of its five highest-ranked members who were part of a group of *shukkesha* called "sacred grand teachers" (*seitaishi* 正大師). The five members were Ishii Hisako, Tomoko (Asahara's wife), Achari (Asahara's third daughter), Murai Hideo, and Jōyū Fumihiro. A graduate from the prestigious Waseda University, Jōyū joined Aum in August 1986 when he was twenty-four years old and less than one year later (May 1987) he renounced the world.<sup>4</sup> Jōyū had been given the "holy name" Maitreya (マイトレーヤ, the future Buddha) by Asahara<sup>5</sup> and from 1992 he was in charge of Aum branches in Russia, and until

4. In 1986 Aum was still called Aum Shinsen no Kai オウム神仙の会. The name was changed to Aum Shinrikyō in 1987. Jōyū's autobiographical account is available on Hikari no Wa's website. See <http://hikarinowa.net/kyokun/joyu/> (accessed 15 November 2011).

5. Holy names were granted by Asahara in recognition of disciples' spiritual achievements and were usually Japanized versions of Sanskrit names of Buddhas or Buddha's disciples (READER 2000, 83).

1995 he lived mostly outside Japan. After the sarin attack he was recalled to Japan and became Aum's public spokesperson, acquiring public attention and interest because of his skillful performance with the media. Jōyū was never directly linked to Aum's violent crimes, but was found guilty of committing perjury (he initially rejected all the accusations and declared that Aum had not committed any crimes) and he was sentenced to three years in prison. After being released in 1999, Jōyū led the transformation of Aum into a new organization. On 18 January 2000, Jōyū Fumihiko and Muraoka Tatsuko 村岡達子 (who served as the acting representative for Aum after Asahara and his wife were arrested in 1995) announced that the organization replacing Aum was to be called "Aleph" —symbolizing a new beginning—and was to be represented by Jōyū and Muraoka, not Asahara. They also announced changes in the doctrines they espoused, stating that they would retain their yoga and meditation practices but would discontinue teachings considered "dangerous," and announcing that they planned "to start from ground zero" with the organization's structure (JŌYŪ 2000). Aleph was placed under close surveillance for a period of three years under the so-called "Aum New Laws" (*Oumu shinpō* オウム新法), the Victims Compensation Law (*higaisha kyūsaihō* 被害者救済法), and the Organizational Control Law (*dantai kiseihō* 団体規制法), introduced in 1999. According to the laws, the group was required to allow inspection of its facilities and to submit lists of its assets and membership every three months (WILKINSON 2009, 98). This surveillance was extended in 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012.

Aleph had publicly declared that Asahara no longer represented the organization, but there was no consent inside the organization regarding the role Asahara should have as "spiritual leader" of the group. Disputes over this issue divided Aleph's membership into two distinct groups inside the same organization, which led to a schism in 2007. Since 2004 a minority movement, known as the Jōyūha (上祐派 Jōyū branch) had developed inside Aleph. Adherents supported Jōyū's idea that restructuring the group was vital for its survival and, most importantly, that the only way to reform it was to distance themselves completely from Asahara. However, most of the remaining members in Aleph, including Asahara's wife and third daughter, chose to remain loyal to the previous leader, either hanging on to the idea that what had happened was a conspiracy and that the group was persecuted by the state or, while admitting that violent crimes were committed in Asahara's name, justifying them as necessary to reach the group's purposes and still recognizing Asahara as their spiritual leader. For a while the two factions shared the same facilities, but started organizing separate seminars and activities.

In March 2007 Jōyū and around two hundred members of the Jōyūha left Aleph and set up the new religious organization Hikari no Wa. Despite Hikari no Wa's strong public stance of completely rejecting Asahara and Aum, and

its stated activities of actively trying to persuade Aleph's members to leave the group and renounce their "faith in Asahara" (*Asahara shinkō* 麻原信仰), the PSIA decided that it should remain subject to surveillance under the same laws as Aleph.

Since Jōyū's departure, Aleph has refused to make any public statements regarding its relationship with Asahara and his teachings. On the group's website<sup>6</sup> the group's history and the events of 1995 are completely ignored and it seems that very few changes have been made to Aum's previous teachings and practices. Furthermore, the images and pictures used are very similar to the iconography previously used in Aum's websites. According to the PSIA's report, the group's proselytism efforts, mainly carried out on the Internet or on university campuses, are focused on yoga courses (PUBLIC SECURITY INTELLIGENCE AGENCY 2011, 58) and their relationship with Aum is not explicitly clarified in their advertisements. According to some ex-members I have interviewed, old videos showing Asahara are still shown during training and the group still strongly emphasizes its loyalty to the previous leader. Aleph does not have an official representative at the moment and a degree of secrecy surrounds its activities, so it is difficult to ascertain exactly what the situation is within this group. I have attempted several times to contact the group, and to ask questions concerning its leadership and training, but such attempts have been unsuccessful. Such reticence on the part of Aleph only serves to arouse suspicion, while the recent tension with Adachi ward residents mentioned earlier also demonstrates the levels of concern surrounding the group.

In 2007 around 10 percent of the *shukkesha* remaining within Aleph (around sixty to seventy people) followed Jōyū into his new movement. Some of them soon left the organization, but, according to Hikari no Wa's representatives, they did not rejoin Aleph. Some of them joined other religious organizations, but for the most part moving into Hikari no Wa represented a first step for a definitive withdrawal from Aum and religion in general. As of August 2011 the group numbered around thirty members permanently living in the group's facilities (previously these members were called *shukkesha*, but they are now usually referred to as "staff") and approximately two hundred lay members. Furthermore, the group claims that around two hundred members are based in Russia and that since 2010 around two to three hundred people have approached the group and attended events and pilgrimages, without necessarily (or yet) joining it.<sup>7</sup> The majority of staff members are former followers of Aum, and initially Jōyū had declared that he was not interested in attracting new members. However,

6. <http://aleph.to> (accessed 15 November 2011).

7. Private conversations and interviews with the group's representatives, November 2010–January 2011, and August 2011.

recognizing that new members were vital for its survival, in 2010 the group entered a new phase in its development and intensified its proselytizing activities, especially via the web. Regardless of Hikari no Wa's declaration and efforts to show their self-reflection and willingness to change, the group still attracts stigma and its members are still seen as a symbol of the dangers of religion (see the Editors' Introduction in this issue). Indeed, despite these recent efforts, Hikari no Wa's proselytization activities have, at this stage, not met with success and the membership consists more of sympathizers than full members.

To change the image of the group, and to try to persuade opponents—in this case represented not only by police and anti-Aum committees, but more generally, the entire Japanese society—that they have changed and, at the same time, in order to attract new members, Hikari no Wa and Jōyū had to address three fundamental and problematic aspects of Aum: its teachings, its organization, and its image and relations with the “outside world.”

#### *A New Religion for the Twenty-First Century*

In one of the first public announcements after its foundation, Hikari no Wa declared that its representative (Jōyū) chose its name without explicit reference to a religious organization, such as *shūkyō hōjin* or *shūkyō dantai*—previously used by Aum and Aleph—to indicate that the focus of the new group would not be on the worship of a specific individual or god, but rather on the development of the “sacred” in every individual (Jōyū s.d.). In the same document, the group explains that it will incorporate different “sacred symbols” and practices from different religious traditions. Although the new organization will have, at least at the beginning, a more pronounced “Buddhist flavor,” its aim is to be more eclectic and include references to Japanese traditions, including Shinto. It also stated that it would like to be presented as a “spiritual service center” or a “holistic healing center” (Jōyū s.d.). These statements indicate an awareness not only of the issues related to the negative image of “religion” in Japan (see Editors' Introduction) but also of the discourse concerning spirituality and (at least the perceived) popularity of healing practices. Additionally, it reveals the group's aim, from a teaching point of view, of reclaiming its Japanese roots, shifting the source of doctrinal authority from India (which was a key reference point for Asahara and Aum) to early Japanese Buddhism (in particular the semi-legendary figure of Shōtoku Taishi) and Shinto tradition.

In a textbook distributed to participants at Hikari no Wa's summer seminar in August 2010, Jōyū illustrates three main elements for the establishment of what he defines “the reformation of religion for the twenty-first century” (HIKARI NO WA 2010). According to the text, religion in the twentieth century has been characterized by several problems, including blind beliefs, fanaticism, and conflict



with society and groups, and Hikari no Wa aspires to offer humanity a “new religion” for the new century (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 37). The three constituents of the new path are: “to overcome blind beliefs” (*mōshin o koeru* 盲信を超える), “to transcend dualism and the struggle between good and evil” (*zen'aku nigenron to tōsō o koeru* 善悪二元論と闘争を超える) and, finally, “to abolish the barrier between the religious community and society” (*kyōdan to shakai no kabe o koeru* 教団と社会の壁を超える; all from HIKARI NO WA 2010).

To achieve the first objective, it is necessary to reject any kind of absolutism regarding both the leader and the teachings. The relationship between leader and members, the text explains, should be similar to that of *senpai/kōhai* (senior/junior) and based on balance and humility (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 37). The disciples should avoid absorbing the teachings without reflection in order to avoid “getting stuck” (*hamaru*; HIKARI NO WA 2010, 38). Using the example of scientific discovery, the text argues that in science there is no “adoration” for earlier pioneering scientists, but respect (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 38). The same aim should be pursued by religious groups as well: disciples should learn humbly from their master, assimilate the teachings, and then produce new and more advanced teachings and thoughts (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 38).

The second issue is a recurrent theme in Jōyū's talks and the group's publications. According to Jōyū, the absolute distinction between good and evil was the cause of the tension between Aum and the larger society (the latter of which was considered absolute evil by Aum members). Members are invited to follow a “middle way” path and avoid extremism. Furthermore, according to Jōyū, absolute evil and absolute good do not exist, although it is important to understand why someone committed evil or violent actions (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 40). The key to stop hating people who committed violence, or to stop adoring a leader who justified it, is, according to Hikari no Wa's teachings, self reflection (*jiko hansei* 自己反省). Jōyū insists that the solution is not in hating people who committed violence, but in understanding their weaknesses.

Finally, the new religion for the twenty-first century should be open to everybody and not create separation between the group and society (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 41). In order to do this, Hikari no Wa is thinking of opening their training and practices to everybody who is interested, online or at its centers. In particular, according to Hikari no Wa, the Internet will offer an opportunity to create a network of spiritual advancement that can potentially reach the entire world, without the limits of space and time, a network named by the group “Global Spiritual Networking” (グローバル・スピリチュアル・ネットワークング; HIKARI NO WA 2010, 42).

As with many other new religious movements in the early stages of development, Hikari no Wa claims to have discovered a new truth, or better, to have the answer on how to renew religion in the twenty-first century. The legitimization

of this claim is based on the fact that Hikari no Wa's members, who were once in Aum, have experienced the worst effects of twentieth-century religion, and for this reason they are the ones who will be able to offer a new path and will be able to avoid previous mistakes.<sup>8</sup> This reference to past experiences and mistakes as a means of showing that the group has something meaningful to say in the present recalls similar attempts by other Japanese religious groups to reinterpret the past and use it to indicate that they have important messages for the future. Thus, in the case of Agonshū, its leader Kiriya Seiyū was once, prior to embarking on a religious path, incarcerated for fraudulent activities, and subsequently Kiriya has used this bad experience in his past as a way of teaching followers that one is able to overcome one's misfortunes and turn them into a positive learning experience that can help one advance spiritually (READER 1991, 210). Such themes also recur in Jōyū's lectures.

Similar to other new religions, the group advocates a "return to the origins" as a focal point for the proposed renewal. In Hikari no Wa's case, this entails not only again discussing the group's Buddhist teachings, but also reconsidering the Japanese religious tradition, in order to be accepted as a "new group" and avoid being labeled as "the new Aum." Indeed Jōyū is not only dropping the "dangerous practices" and rejecting the previous leader (*hansei shinagara, Asahara kara dakkai*, "while performing self-reflection, breaking away from Asahara" is one of the group's slogans), but also introducing several new practices, rituals, pilgrimages, and so on. In particular, Hikari no Wa is rejecting extreme asceticism, the idea that one can acquire supernatural powers through yoga practice, beliefs in the end of the world, and prophecies (Jōyū explicitly states that he does not believe in prophecies and he is not able to make them), and *poa*-related beliefs (that is, beliefs related to the concept developed in Aum that it was legitimate to kill people in order to save them and in order to protect the "truth"). At the same time, new esoteric and Shinto-based rituals have been introduced and performed at the centers (which have become, as a consequence, the new sacred places of Hikari no Wa) together with previous practices such as kundalini yoga and meditation (although extreme forms of meditation and ascetic techniques are now discouraged). Similarly intensive seminars are still organized three times a year (December/January, May, and August) while new social events are introduced; in particular, since 2010, pilgrimages that are also sometimes open to non-members, to Japanese "sacred places" such as famous Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. For example, in November 2010, Hikari no Wa organized a pilgrimage to Izumo Shrine in Shimane Prefecture to attend the Kami-ari festi-

8. The idea that previous mistakes can be changed into success is often repeated by Jōyū in his talks and he also expressed this in an email exchange between himself and students in my New Religious Movements class in June 2011.

val. The pilgrimage also included a visit to Kōgenji and Tachibanadera, two temples in Nara associated with Shōtoku Taishi, and to two temples, Kōryūji (where, according to the group, Jōyū came to meditate in front of the statue of Miroku when he was having doubts about Aum), and Seiryūji, in Kyoto.

This raises the important issue of how a movement can escape its past if it also needs to change or get rid of the practices that were so essential to it. Indeed, the ex-Aum members who joined Hikari no Wa are still very focused on previous training (especially yoga and other physical practices) and resist the introduction of new rituals. Hikari no Wa has to find a balance between introducing new teachings, criticizing and leaving behind the “dangerous practices” of Aum and, at the same time, maintaining enough continuity with past teachings to remain appealing to ex-Aum members. The past cannot be deleted and the group has to retain part of it to allow ex-members to still feel comfortable in the group. This however implies the risk of completely losing the group’s own identity. The attraction of extreme physical practices along with belief in Aum’s end-of-the-world prophecies were two main motives behind members’ (including most of Hikari no Wa’s members) decisions to join Aum in the 1980s. By rejecting both of these, Jōyū is eradicating much of the previous foundation upon which the group was based, and the result is that the group has to find a new base upon which to construct its own identity. In 2010 the group started creating its own narratives based on mysterious events surrounding the leader and, using Jōyū’s words, after a transitional period (2007–2010), in 2011 it began to understand the essence of the group and to make clear what is “particular” to Hikari no Wa. According to recent accounts, any time Jōyū is doubtful or struggling to make a decision regarding his new direction, an unusual type of rainbow appears. The group interprets this as a sign that Jōyū (and, as a consequence, the entire group) is now following the right path.<sup>9</sup>

At the moment, the group seems not to have a clear idea of what direction Hikari no Wa should take and Jōyū admitted in an interview with me in August 2011 that the group is still in a transitional period both from the point of view of its organization and teachings. Changes in teachings and practices are typical during the early stages of the formation of religious movements, as has been discussed in the case of Agonshū (READER 1991) or Kōfuku no Kagaku (BAFFELLI 2005). Furthermore, Hikari no Wa shares similarities with other secessionist groups, such as expressing strong criticism of the group they seceded from, and distancing itself from its previous leader while reinterpreting his teachings. In Hikari no Wa’s case the group is struggling to preserve and develop such teachings while amending them in ways that remove their problematic and violent aspects. For Hikari no Wa the rebirth from Aum’s ashes can only be successful if

9. This idea was expressed in Jōyū’s talks. Most of Jōyū’s public talks are available on Hikari no Wa’s website. See <http://www.joyus.jp/movie/> (accessed 15 November 2011).

the group is able to escape from its links to Asahara and Aum and come to terms with the trauma of its dark past. Many members admitted to me that the most difficult issue for them is to accept the idea that they do not have possession of the exclusive truth anymore and that they are at the same level as other human beings. As a consequence, and differing from the usual process of formation of new religious movements, in which a group or leader discovers a “new truth” and establishes a new movement claiming special ownership of this new truth, Hikari no Wa’s members have to accept that their “exclusive truth” was erroneous and caused death and destruction, and that their new truth implies accepting the idea that they are not part of a “special elite” of people.

For some members the main reason for staying in the group is the fact that they feel a strong bond with other members because of what they have been through, and through this they can sustain each other. Without the group they do not know what else to do. Some of them even opposed Jōyū’s idea of creating a new religious group, as they would have preferred to have kept a lower profile and remained as a small anonymous group of “survivors.” Other members, however, still feel strongly of their mission to “save the world.” They could not fulfill their aim in Aum and, while feeling responsible for what happened, they are determined to prove to themselves and the external world that they have changed. The recognition of not having an “exclusive truth” or the acceptance of having followed a wrong path for many years, however, has put the members and the group in a very vulnerable position. If the group does not find a new “truth” (which is extremely difficult because any definitive declaration of truth by the group will be seen by the wider public and agencies such as the PSIA as a replication of the previous dangerous path) it may slowly disappear or just survive as a small group of ex-Aum members.

Hikari no Wa emerged, as have other new religious movements, from a crisis. This crisis, however, was not a crisis in society at large or an organizational crisis inside the group, but a personal, internal crisis of some ex-Aum members who, after a process of struggle lasting several years, started to accept Aum’s painful past and to doubt their loyalty to their previous leader. For them, joining Hikari no Wa implies the recognition that what they believed for many years (in some cases for as many as twenty years) was wrong and dangerous, but it also represents a way out and a chance to prove (first of all to themselves) that they have changed and finally dissociated themselves completely from Aum’s crimes. In the case of Hikari no Wa, the adaptational strategy (DAWSON 1999, 63) to the failure of prophecy is not a reinterpretation of events in order to justify existing beliefs, so much as it is a complete rejection of past prophecies and the (unsettling) recognition that the members had devoted their lives (and tried to persuade other people to join them) to beliefs they now consider foolish and unsustainable.

*Charismatic Leader or “Celebrity God”?*

The role of the (charismatic) leader has been considered by numerous studies not only to be one of the fundamental elements in the creation of new religious movements, but also to be one of the possible causes of the development of violent behavior in some religious groups. According to WEBER’s definition (1968), charismatic authority is an inherently unstable form of leadership because it is dependent on the relationship between the leader and the followers, who may switch allegiances to other charismatic figures. In particular, Asahara’s personality, although not the only reason, has been seen as one of the causes of the path toward violence in Aum Shinrikyō (READER 2000). For these reasons, the question of the relationship between leader and members is particularly delicate in Hikari no Wa. Jōyū has explicitly stated that he does not want to become “the new Asahara,”<sup>10</sup> but at the same time he has to justify his role as a leader and to find a way to legitimize his charisma. Asahara did not explicitly name a successor, but his offspring (his young sons at first and his third daughter later) were initially seen as his natural heirs. By claiming that he was Asahara’s first male disciple and that Asahara sent him to Russia “to save him,”<sup>11</sup> Jōyū is claiming that, even if he is now distancing himself from the previous leader, he is the one who had the sanction of Asahara and who has the power and the authority to continue the group. This idea is also reiterated in Hikari no Wa’s texts explaining that we should learn from our past and that a new teacher should not completely reject his/her old teachers, but learn from them to improve his/her teachings (HIKARI NO WA 2010, 38). This is an extremely important issue for ex-members, because while Asahara’s charisma was built on his reputation as master/guru (demonstrated by his claims to possess supernatural powers and the ability to make prophecies), Jōyū is somehow a self-appointed leader.

Furthermore, old and new members have different opinions regarding the basis for charismatic authority legitimation. For ex-Aum members, Jōyū is the new leader because of the high spiritual level he achieved in Aum (for example, he was the only disciple able to perform Aum’s underground meditation and the holy name Asahara gave him, Maitreya, was the name of the future Buddha), while for new members, who mainly contacted him via the Internet, his charisma is based on his status as a celebrity, a status he acquired as Aum’s spokes-

10. This statement was expressed during a talk at the Tokyo Center, 23 January, 2011.

11. According to Jōyū’s account, Asahara sent him to Russia because he prophesized that 1994 would be a dangerous year for Jōyū if he stayed in Japan. In doing so, Asahara avoided him being involved with the preparation of sarin gas and the planning of the attack. See <http://hikarinowa.net/kyokun/joyu/01aumsriminalmisconduct/1992-1994.html>, and Jōyū’s talk show at the live house Loft Plus One (13 December 2010) at <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/11414758> (accessed 4 November 2011).

person when the Aum Affair became a major news event. Immediately after the sarin gas attack in March and until the arrest of Asahara in May, Jōyū frequently appeared on popular television talk shows, to the point that he and other members were said to have become more well known in Japan than most politicians (GARDNER 2001, 139). They were often compared to TV “idols” or TV personalities known as *tarento*, and Jōyū in particular became particularly well known for his ability to reply to journalists’ questions and criticism. Even the idiom *aa ieba kō iu*, meaning “to have a comeback for every remark,” was transformed, playing with the assonance between the final two words (*kō iu*) and the name of the leader (*jōyū*) into the idiomatic expression *sō ieba, jōyū* to point out his ability to sharply reject accusations and attacks.

The ways in which the two groups of members see the leader are crucially different. Despite the group’s attempts to present a less hierarchical structure and introduce a more direct relationship between leader and members, for many ex-Aum members who moved to Hikari no Wa, Jōyū is an “extraordinary being” and a certain level of deference and respect is required when talking to (or about) him. Indeed, the claimed appearance of rainbows to signify when Jōyū’s attempts to rethink the group’s way forward is heading in the right direction seems to indicate that he is starting to be invested with mystical powers in the eyes of followers. Similarly, staff members (those who were formerly known, in Aum, as *shukkesha*) are considered different from lay members. Many of these ex-Aum members have known Jōyū for many years and they also consider him as someone who shared their struggles and confusion after 1995.

For new members, Jōyū is a media celebrity and, especially initially, their interaction with him is mainly mediated online and they feel allowed to ask him all sorts of private questions in order to satisfy their curiosity. The image of Jōyū as an accessible celebrity is an important aspect of the promotion of the group, both internally and externally. As explained by Benjamin DORMAN (2012, 15):

...such media representation of leaders, either through depicting their own lives or by presenting the testimonials of those who follow them, plays a vital role in connecting members of a religious group to a shared identity and shared vision.

In the case of Hikari no Wa, however, this is also creating new tensions between old and new members, especially because old members feel neglected by the leader (who is focusing on “taking care” of new members). These tensions may indicate that in the renegotiation of the group’s identity, rethinking hierarchical relationships and questions related to perceptions of the leader are crucial issues that may depend on the success of the new organization.

*Relationship With the “Outside World”*

The process of the self-legitimation of Hikari no Wa and its leader need to be affirmed through external acceptance. The claims that the group has changed and that members are reflecting upon and correcting their past mistakes have not been accepted by outsiders yet, in particular by the police, the PSIA, and anti-Aum committees, such as the previously mentioned Oumu Taisaku Jūmin Kyōgikai in Setagaya ward. In 2000 Aleph apologized to Aum’s victims and their families, but, as explained by MULLINS (2001, 81) “The lack of self-reflection or signs of remorse on the part of Aum members contributed a great deal to the high level of public distrust.” Jōyū and Hikari no Wa’s members are trying to address the situation anew, organizing public events, publishing members’ memoirs, meeting family members of Aum’s victims, and attempting to have a dialogue with local anti-Aum committee members. In late 2011 Hikari no Wa established a group of “external observers” (*gaibukansanin* 外部監査人) who have no connection with the group and will have the role of independently observing and checking the group’s activities and facilities. The committee (*gaibukansaiinkai* 外部監査委員会) includes people who have been involved in anti-Aum activities and victims’ organizations.<sup>12</sup> The establishment of this committee is seen by Hikari no Wa as a way of demonstrating to the general public that it is not a dangerous group. However, public anger against the group and the constant control by the police and anti-Aum committee members outside the group’s centers (especially in Tokyo) make it very difficult for Hikari no Wa’s members to hold meetings, organize events, and be heard by the media (especially TV and newspapers).

As a consequence, it is necessary to find other ways to get new members. In particular, Hikari no Wa has been very active online, both in spreading its message and in increasing its proselytism activities. The group has been also developing a “Net Dōjō”<sup>13</sup> to specifically promote online religious activities, related to the idea expressed by Jōyū that “the twenty-first century will be the place for “Internet religion” (*netto shūkyō*).<sup>14</sup> The idea of “Net Dōjō,” (also called *jitaku dōjō*), a platform including different types of material and videos, was developed in 2007 in order to allow potential members to engage with the group within the privacy of their houses and without having to visit the centers, and it represented an innovative view of religious practices that may potentially support Hikari no Wa’s proselytism efforts. According to its leader,

12. The media reported that Kōno Yoshiyuki 河野義行 who was initially and wrongly suspected of the Matsumoto sarin attack in June 1994 would also be a member of this committee. See <http://www.asahi.com/national/update/1203/SEB201112030007.html> (accessed 11 January 2012).

13. <http://net-dojō.hikarinowa.net/home.html> (accessed 4 November 2011).

14. Interview with Jōyū, 4 November 2010.



without the Internet the group would not be able to proselytize and, at the same time, the use of the new media represents for Hikari no Wa a shift from Aum's approach that "if you don't join the commune you won't be saved" to a more flexible "you can learn and practice by distance" stance. The website<sup>15</sup> established by Hikari no Wa immediately after the foundation of the group included extensive coverage of public declarations and personal accounts by Jōyū, who is becoming an active user of Mixi, the biggest social network website in Japan,<sup>16</sup> and Twitter.<sup>17</sup> In October 2010 Jōyū started a blog<sup>18</sup> in which he replies to comments and questions that have been asked by readers on Twitter. Furthermore, Jōyū has increasingly been using streaming videos online via the group's YouTube channel<sup>19</sup> or the free video streaming website Ustream,<sup>20</sup> to introduce his directions for the new group, explain Buddhist teachings, and also often to strongly criticize Aum and Aleph.

Because of their previous relationship with Aum, Hikari no Wa's members find it difficult to get their views reported in the mass media, and at the moment, they cannot afford their own publishing house. The Internet offers an important and vital tool to the group to spread its teachings, claim its new path, and engage in dialogue and discussion with members and other users (BAFFELLI 2011). The publication online of members' memoirs and its leader's confessions offer the group a critical medium to renegotiate its public face (ROJEK 2004, 85). Furthermore, the web is becoming an important tool to attract new members. Since late 2010 Hikari no Wa has started the so-called *off kai* (オフ会, lit. "offline meetings"), meetings between Jōyū and Hikari no Wa members and users who have been in contact with them through Mixi or Twitter. The *off kai* are usually held at public halls and create a "neutral" space where interested (or simply curious) persons can meet and talk with Jōyū. During the meetings, participants have declared that they prefer to meet the group outside its facilities because they still do not feel comfortable visiting the centers because of the "dangerous" image linked to the group or because, especially in Tokyo, they do not want to be stopped and questioned by the police officers who stand outside the headquarters.

As I have discussed elsewhere (BAFFELLI 2011), Jōyū is trying to create an open, direct, and interactive relationship with his readers via the Internet, inviting them to send questions and engage in an interactive dialogue. It follows that

15. <http://hikarinowa.net/> (accessed 15 November 2011).

16. The news of Jōyū starting to use Mixi was reported in several newspapers. See, for example, <http://news.livedoor.com/article/detail/3070482/> (accessed 4 November 2011).

17. [http://twitter.com/joyu\\_fumihiro](http://twitter.com/joyu_fumihiro) (accessed 4 November 2011).

18. <http://ameblo.jp/joyufumihiro/> (accessed 4 November 2011).

19. <http://www.youtube.com/user/hikarinowadouga> (accessed 4 November 2011).

20. <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/hikarinowa> (accessed 4 November 2011).



these interactive features also serve as opportunities for Jōyū to promote a new idea of a religious leader, and to project a transparent image of a leader who is no longer untouchable, but who now interacts with members or fans online, “sharing his or her life in a more unfiltered manner” (BURNS 2009, 50).

From September 2009 the group also started online live broadcasting through Ustream, streaming Jōyū’s Buddhist sermons (*seppō* 説法) from its centers. Jōyū’s lectures are sometimes focused on criticizing Aleph and stressing the fact that Hikari no Wa has rejected Asahara’s leadership, or presenting rather didactic introductions to Buddhist teachings. This could possibly indicate his awareness that viewers might not necessarily be potential members, but are people who are interested in carefully watching his activities and evaluating his relationship with Aum’s doctrine and activities. Thus, these streamed videos also serve as opportunities for the group to publicly declare their disassociation from Aum and to reply to possible criticisms. However, despite the apparent “openness” of Jōyū’s image online, interaction with the leader is strictly controlled by the group. The preoccupation with uncontrolled streams of comments and criticisms was confirmed by Jōyū during an interview I had with him in November 2010 in his reply to my question about why comments were not allowed on his blog. At the same time, Hikari members who have been with Jōyū since his Aum days sometimes seem uncomfortable with Jōyū’s overexposure in the media and think that his interactions with outsiders should be more rigidly regulated.

Hikari no Wa’s attempts to reach a larger audience, however, seem to have been largely ignored by the major newspapers and TV news channels. Only a few magazines have contacted the group for interviews in recent times. Similarly, anti-Aum committees’ members have been visiting the centers, but they remain very skeptical toward Hikari no Wa’s changes.<sup>21</sup> To date, online public disclosure seems to have reached only a small niche of people who were already interested in Aum’s ex-members, Aum’s teachings, or Jōyū as a public figure. However, Hikari no Wa’s use of the Internet, and especially its social networking services and blogs, is an example of the innovative use of media communication among Japanese religious organizations and appears to be developing into a powerful tool for allowing the group to start spreading its message more widely and to attract new “sympathizers.”

### *Conclusion*

After 1995 Aum (and its members) faced three possibilities: disappear, survive as it was, or restructure itself as a new group. In the case of Aleph, doctrinal elements have been used to explain and justify Aum’s participation in crimi-

21. Personal interview with a representative of Oumu Taisaku Jūmin Kyōgikai in Setagaya, January 2011. See also the association’s homepage, <http://www.kyogikai.jp/> (accessed 4 November 2011).

nal activities and to reinforce the idea the group was/is persecuted by society (KISALA and MULLINS 2001, 10). Members of the group appear (at least according to ex-members) still committed to the movement and Asahara.

By contrast, Jōyū thought that restructuring the group was the only way for it to survive. He started talking and thinking about the changes while he was still in prison in 1998 and sent letters to encourage members toward this direction. After a transitional process after Jōyū's release, the new group is now creating its own identity as a new religion, changing its teachings and searching for a new path, but at the same time trying to cope with the onerous heritage of its members' previous involvement with Aum.

Two main issues were very problematic in Aum and needed to be addressed in restructuring the organization: the leader's image and the leader-member relationship on the one hand, and the "dangerous" teachings and Aum's extreme physical practices on the other. Jōyū's reforms have addressed both issues but they have also created new tensions. His decision made in 2010 to start expanding the group, and not limit it to a small group of ex-members "helping each other to become happy while understanding their sadness" (a phrase often used by Jōyū in sermons and which surely has a strong appeal for ex-Aum members who do not have any other place to go to), has opened the possibility for the group of a longer survival, but it has also created dissatisfaction among its members who were formerly in Aum. At the same time, new people approaching Hikari no Wa without prior links to Aum may be attracted by its previous relationship with Aum and they may be disappointed in discovering that the group is no longer emphasizing extreme practices and supernatural powers. Potential members interested in yoga tend not to approach the group because of its stigma as an ex-Aum group. Finding a balance between previous practices and teachings and new doctrines, the old and new members' views of leadership, and media usage and overexposure represent the main challenges Hikari no Wa will have to face in the following years.

After the subway attack, Aum Shinrikyō came under immense pressure as its leaders were arrested and its criminal activities exposed to public scrutiny. Many devotees left the movement at this time, shocked at the violence and by the failure of prophecy so evident in the events surrounding Aum. Massive public antipathy towards Aum further threatened the very existence of the group. Yet the movement has not completely disappeared, while there are former members who have—as is the case with Jōyū and Hikari no Wa—sought to reconstitute themselves as a new religious group seeking a path out of the ashes of the old movement. This has involved the group in difficult questions about how to deal with the past while not wholly refuting it, and about how to renegotiate issues of charisma, doctrine, leadership, and proselytism while trying to avoid raising fears that it is little more than a reinvention of Aum. The ability by Hikari no Wa

to transform itself radically in a relatively short space of time (a characteristic of self-transformation shared by several other Japanese new religions) is a key factor in this process, and it offers us a means through which we can develop clearer understandings of how a religious organization seeks to respond to challenges and disasters and deals with an onerous past while repositioning itself in order to try to secure its future.

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